

## CONTACT GRP

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### GREGORY O'TOOLE: BIG CITY FREIGHT TRAIN BLUES

**This is your third collection of poetry. How does *Big City Freight Train Blues* complement the other collections; what would you like it to accomplish?**

Big City is the first collection I've put together having to do with one place. I guess people will say that all—or most, anyway—of the poems I've written have a “road” or traveling theme, but I like to tell them that they are more or less a sort of “day in the life” documentary. Nearly every poem I've ever written—almost everything I've ever written for that matter—is what's going on right then and there for me, in my life. *Big City Freight Train Blues* is a continuation of that, a series of days and nights and bars and parties and clerks and weird and serious people who I've come across getting out of bed every morning here in Denver. Part of me is a journalist and the other part likes finding the strange. Sometimes the strange is the strange because it cannot get any more solemn. Whatever is happening right now is what



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It's kind of like watching films, sometimes. By that, I mean, you see these movies in the theatres that have used a visual narrative technique that is sometimes referred to as ‘drawback’. A drawback would be the part of the feature that changes somehow—grainier look to the film, older style of clothes on the characters, a change in the immediate sense of place, etc—like in JFK when the director spliced in real footage of Kennedy's procession in Dallas. That particular footage, it has been confirmed many times, was really from November 22, 1963, but, in other movies when this is done, sometimes you just don't know. It's these episodes of art, that we are supposed to regard as pure entertainment, or literature, or actual history, or big time Hollywood movie production that somehow, somewhere in our true minds we aren't sure if what we are witnessing is real footage—a record of a past reality—or not. It's the truth, we think, we just don't know how edited that truth has been before it reaches us. It's master storytelling.

**What is your approach to writing poems? How arduous is your editing process?**

I haven't been to Lowell yet, but one time I did see a photograph of a display from a Jack Kerouac archive. It was this enormous pile of old pocket spiral bound notebooks that were each beat to hell from use and wear. He'd marked them with the year in which he'd been writing. This was probably eight or nine years ago, before I even really knew any poetry, but there was something really drawing about all that effort and time spent filling those journals up that I loved. Right then I went out and bought one of those ninety-cent notebooks and I've had one in my back pocket ever since. I have a big grocery bag full of the old,

filled-up ones at home now. That's pretty much it for me as far as any type of writing practice goes: when it hits me, it goes into the little book. Speaking of that, I was sitting meditation with my girlfriend, Carey, a wonderful, beautiful person, in the gomba at Naropa University some time ago and lost one of those notebooks, so now there's one floating around out there somewhere. Maybe, when I'm in my sixties or seventies, after I am named US Poet Laureate, a long time from now, and I get to sit in that Washington office where the phone never rings, that notebook'll pop up on Ebay.

**Your poem “Working Man's Blues” is sort of a tribute, or love song, to the working man and blue collar ideals; you also say that you write of and for the proletariat. What are your thoughts about commercial success and the business of poetry? Can you maintain a balance and still keep your artistic integrity?**

Well, I don't know of anyone who's ever written a poem for money. I remember the first time I tried writing a poem and how I felt about what I was doing, and the concept of money or getting paid never crossed my mind. When your work starts getting published, or people start buying your records or paintings or paying to see your performances, I think you automatically start thinking about the pay; it just happens. But I don't equate the two. The way I see it, the poems I write are about my life, the jobs, the people, the happenings, the places, the things in those places. That's what makes up the content of my work. I mean, you mentioned “Working Man's Blues”. That poem never would have had a chance to be written if it weren't for all those jobs I've slugged through over the years. It's a process, you know, and an attitude. I like proverbs when they are veritable, so I really like the saying “It's not the destination, it's the journey.” It's the attitude one keeps around all of those jobs that's most important.

I was brought up in a working middle class family around Chicago. I don't think a person could be raised in a more ideal environment with loving and providing parents and a big family. It is a solid communal thing, but also allows for the individual to learn to appreciate what he or she has and what they can earn and not to take for granted. I write for anyone who's listening—or reading. I think the messages in the work are clear for the most part, and people are either going to get it or they're not. I don't worry too much about the one's who don't get it. Jim James from the rock band My Morning Jacket said he really liked “Working Man's Blues” especially, and that the poem reminded him of all the jobs he's bothered with in his young life, too. He said, “There are a lot of people like us searching for what's right in this world.” Those guys get asked to play enormous gigs with legendary musicians like The Allman Brothers Band and John Prine. If that's not commercial success, I don't know what is, and he's still mentioning things like integrity, and doing what's right. I just have a vision of my life, and writing about it is a huge part. But losing contact with what I know is right will never happen.

**What can *Big City Freight Train Blues* offer to the person who has never read, or been intimidated by, poetry?**

I like to think that the book is able to offer a colorful story written in the contemporary American idiom, the common vernacular, the way people my age talk to each other, and others.

Anyone who's ever been uninterested or intimidated by poetry should read a few lines of the first Billy Collins poem they come to online. I recently witnessed one of his readings at the Univer-

sity of Denver. The man could easily have made a good living as a smashing comic writer, satirist, or probably anything else he made an honest attempt at, but the simplicity of what he transmits to the reader or audience is more than enough to change the mind of the most stubborn of anti-Shakespearean, American-educated skeptics or anyone who has ever been intimidated by the word 'poem'. Poetry and prose are not what they used to be, and the less stylized they read, the better.

**Two of the poems in the collection are dedicated to Hunter S. Thompson. What kind of influence did he have on you as a poet, and what type of influence will his death—particularly the way he died—have on you now?**

I have this theory going that I'm going to write a lot more about called The Quantumedia Experiment. I've subtitled it *The philosophical pursuit of the fundamental unit of electromagnetic energy*. I know that sounds heavy, but really it's not. It's an ontological perspective of our actions that make up our lives, a poetics of existence. But really it's just this idea of "Life as Art," and no one that I've ever been exposed to has lived up to this idea more than Hunter Thompson. Maybe Scott Nearing, but that's a whole other story (laugh). The idea is simple, really, of being mindful of everything I do and knowing how it affects my surroundings, my work, my attitude, my health, my love. I think it might sound narcissistic, but it's not; in fact it's very responsible. (I wonder if anyone else has ever used the term 'very responsible' when discussing Hunter Thompson.) It is a heightened awareness, a very effective combination of Eastern philosophy and ... my Western upbringing. Hunter had this and he did it in his own way, of course, because there is no other way for it to be done. I have a particular set of similarities with the Good Doctor, so I think that is why he affected me in such a profound way. I tore through all of his books and all of the magazine articles I could get my hands on, but he's from Louisville, KY—that's where I was born, he spent a lot of time kicking around when he was really young working for newspapers, etc. I've been doing that for a while now. Mostly what comes across in his stories is a very strong sense of narrative, I mean that's what Tom Wolfe and the rest of the new journalist horde did, and with that is the attitude of "Here is what happened from my perspective, take it or leave it." If the reader decides to take it, it may or may not be particularly pleasant, but it's going to be honest. Sometimes too honest.

I don't know how anyone can shoot themselves in the head knowing full well that a family member is going to find you that way. People are twisted. But, like my brother said about the situation, the man had demons none of us will ever know, and we cannot envy him that. I just take the good of what he taught me as an as-full-blown-as-it-gets master storyteller, and carry it into my own work, like I've always tried to do.

**You just finished up your graduate degree in Digital Media Studies at the University of Denver. What was your area of influence, and how does New Media fit or enhance "old" forms of poetry?**

Man, anyone who is really interested in this really should check out the web site where I've posted my newest media project called RADIO-QMX ( [www.radio-qmx.org](http://www.radio-qmx.org)). It's the broadcast headquarters of The Quantumedia Experiment and the Graphagromaniac Blog that I use as a new media manuscript generator. Right now, I'm working on a book called *The Gadabout Letters* that uses journal-entry style episodes to create a long, segmented

story, daily life stuff, that when looked at in a certain light, can be very interesting to follow. Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America* is done very much in the same way. The only difference there is that he wrote *Trout Fishing in America* into the story as an entirely autonomous concept, not as a verb or an activity. The entire book is based on the concept of a concept. It really is a work of comic (there's that word again, Billy Collins) literary genius. Check it out, you'll see what I mean. It's one of the greatest books out there.

*The Metaphorm Technodysey* is the live documentation component of the online project. The idea is to have one traveler, composer, whatever you want to call it, out in the field, documenting, writing, taking photos, recording audio, video, anything, really, and then uploading it, creating a "virtual expedition" for viewers around the world on this side of the digital divide to participate in. It's starting to get really exciting now that I've begun to implement podcasting, GPS functionality, wireless photograph uploads from my camera phone; it too is a work in progress. I think, especially now, it has unlimited potential for me and my work, as well as for academic departments who are all starting to open up these new media programs and see the benefit in merging mass and interpersonal communication with technology and the creative process.

I still have the pen and notebook in the back pocket, of course.

**Besides HST and Kerouac, who are your influences?** Richard Brautigan, not just because he is a great, innovative storyteller who was smart enough to spend at least part of his life in Montana, but mostly for *Trout Fishing in America*; Gregory Corso, especially as an old man; all of the members of The Band, especially for *The Last Waltz*; Ralph Steadman; Marshall McLuhan; Freidrich Kittler; the maestro Pato Margetic and the 1981 Chicago Sting; John Popper because he's the only wizard I've ever known who came from New Jersey; Waylon Jennings and the rest of those Outlaws; Victor Higgins; Dalton Trumbo; Robert Persig; Dr. Walter Nosal; Katsushika Hokusai; my mother and father; my two sisters; and, my brother, Joe. (Kurt Vonnegut's older brother of a few years was a scientist, too.)

**What will you be doing ten years from now?** If I complete a book of poems a year, that'll be thirteen books in 2015. Maybe one collection of poems every two years instead. I have a novel nearly completed that is sitting over there in the box just waiting for me to get back to it, finish it off. I also have a lot of things going on with other projects as well, like a book of dreams that needs typed up, Short Stories & Black Tea Prose: The Gadabout Letters. In ten years I'll have a small family, secluded home, a Ph.D. that no one's ever thought of before, a university professorship, a new computer (whatever that means at that time), barely room for any more country entrance stamps on my US passport, and a few more grocery bags full of old pocket spiral bound notebooks that are each beat to hell from use and wear.

**GREGORY O'TOOLE** recently completed his Master's Degree from the University of Denver in Digital Media Studies. He has written two other poetry collections and lives in Denver.

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